Marlon Ross points out that at least since World War II the guiding ideal for homosexuals as a distinct minority has been multiculturalism—“the idea that gays and lesbians constitute a fluid minority, whose particular virtue grows out of the fact that they exist inside of every other culture.” Nevertheless, gay communities formed in the 1970s as part of what Jeffrey Escoffier calls the gay territorial economy “marked by the spread of gentrification and neighborhood development” fall far short of any multicultural ideals. The so-called gay ghettos in large U.S. urban areas have been mostly comprised of white males. Clearly, the multicultural guiding ideals about homosexuality as a subculture and the homogeneity of the so-called gay ghetto create a paradox of contemporary gay life.

Although writers in both popular and scholarly genres have noted this paradox of contemporary gay life, they have seldom accounted for it adequately. A typical failed explanation appears in Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson’s *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*, where under the entry “ghetto” they remark: “A distinctive factor of black lesbian and gay life has been that a higher percentage of African American lesbians and gay men live outside gay and lesbian ghettos than their white counterparts.” Hogan and Hudson offer no further
explanation about why the gay ghettos are white or why African American lesbians and gay men do not live in them in larger numbers. The reticence of scholars to explore the whiteness of the gay ghettos might suggest that the answer is simply a matter that black people regardless of sexuality prefer to stick to their own kind. However, I believe that the answer is more complex and that it raises important questions for thinking about contemporary gay life: Why is gay housing and community formation primarily a white and male phenomenon? Does gay community formation deliberately exclude women and people of color? Does gay housing and community formation mirror post–World War II suburbanization, which, by and large, excluded people of color? These questions must be answered if gay community formation is ever to live up to its multicultural ideals.

In this essay I seek to answer some of these questions by critically engaging Lawrence Knopp’s pioneering research about the formation of gay neighborhoods. In the process of engaging Knopp, I wish to point to two areas addressed (albeit insufficiently) in his research that can help us to understand the homogeneity of the gay ghetto. One of those areas is the degree to which gay strategies have focused on integrating into the middle classes; the other is the purpose of white hostility toward African Americans. These two areas are actually interdependent and, historically, have reinforced each other. Knopp’s work contains, I believe, the seeds for a cogent analysis of the ways that racialization operates in the gay world as a “fundamental organizing principle,” to use the words of political scientists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. It is thus important for us to reexamine Knopp’s work to glean from it the ways that race was deployed as a principle for organizing a white and gay housing enclave in the midst of
a majority African American city.

Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation is particularly useful for this exploration into Knopp's work because it pays attention to the way that racial dynamics function at both individual (micro) and collective (macro) levels. At the same time, their theory stresses continuity and reciprocity between individual and collective social relations. As an example, Omi and Winant give racial discrimination, which they state is at a collective level a set of "economic, political and ideological/cultural practices" that have "obvious consequences for the experience and identities of individuals. It affects racial meaning, intervenes in 'personal life,' [and] is interpreted politically." Rather than analytically distinct categories, the individual and the collective are continuous and reciprocal. At the collective or macro level Omi and Winant contend that race is a matter of the formation of social structures, which they understand as a series of "sites" or "regions of social life with a coherent set of constitutive social relations." Typical sites for the formation of racial structures in advanced capitalist societies include the capitalist economy, the patriarchal family, and the liberal democratic state as well as culture. They state: "In the cultural realm, dress, music, art, language and indeed the very concept of 'taste' has been shaped by the racial consciousness and racial dynamics, for instance in the absorption of black musical forms into the white 'mainstream.'"

Omi and Winant's attention to culture is especially useful for the study of the gay world. Culture and culture-building, as the folklorist John Roberts states, "is a recursive, rather than linear, process of endlessly devising solutions to both old and new problems of how to live under ever-changing social, political, and economic
conditions. While culture is dynamic and creative as it adapts to social needs and goals, it is also enduring in that it changes by building upon previous manifestations of itself.” Gay men have created a culture, or a subculture as some insist, that has allowed them to survive, to recognize fellow gays, and even to prosper in a relentlessly, and sometimes brutal, heterosexualizing world. In large part, this culture expresses itself as gay sensibility. Although gay sensibility notoriously defies precision, Michael Bronski observes that gay sensibility is, on the one hand, a strategic negotiation with the dominant world insofar as it “aims to gain some entry into, some acceptance by the mainstream culture” and, on the other hand, refers to the “consciously created” meanings that have arisen from gay people’s “own analyses, experiences, and perceptions.”

One aspect of gay sensibility that requires more attention is racism, or, more specifically, the ways in which the gay and straight worlds cooperate in the production of racial and gender hostility toward black men. In the next section I explore this production through an examination of recurring controlling images of black gay men in film and television. These images shape “the racial consciousness and racial dynamics,” to use Omi and Winant’s language, of gay community formation.

RACE AND GAY NEIGHBORHOOD FORMATION IN NEW ORLEANS

San Francisco’s Castro District is perhaps the most well-known gay community in the world. The creation of the Castro is an oft-repeated narrative that sometimes assumes mythic dimensions. Gay men fleeing oppression in small towns across North America arrived in San Francisco. Finding anonymity in the city and the ability to derive an
income apart from a familial structure, these men created “a gay Israel” in San Francisco. Once established, gay men initiated community renewal projects, which “helped to make the city beautiful and alive.”

Lawrence Knopp’s study of gentrification in the Faubourg Marigny in New Orleans, a small but densely populated area adjacent to the famous French Quarter, presents rigorous and innovative research that sheds much-needed light on gay neighborhood formation. Knopp’s research includes a doctoral dissertation in geography and several articles in refereed journals and anthologies. Not only is Knopp’s research rigorous, it is also innovative because of its interdisciplinary approach. He uses the methods of geography and demography, as well as methods more often associated with sociology, journalism, and history. The result is that his studies are exacting in their precision and also highly engaging.

Knopp’s study is particularly interesting for me because I grew up, attended school and college, and worked in New Orleans. Having come out as a gay man in New Orleans, I was familiar with the neighborhood and surrounding environs that Knopp describes. Perhaps my familiarity with the city led me to notice that Knopp was not particularly adept at explaining the racial homogeneity of the Faubourg Marigny. When I lived in New Orleans, particularly during the years between 1974 and 1983, the Faubourg Marigny appeared to be almost exclusively comprised of white gay men. In his research Knopp confirms my memories about the racial and gender homogeneity of the Faubourg Marigny.

Given that Knopp is such a sophisticated scholar, it is somewhat surprising that he is unable to satisfactorily explain the racial and gender makeup of the Faubourg.
Rather than offering an explanation, Knopp merely restates the paradox that gayness is multicultural yet gay neighborhoods are overwhelmingly white and male. As Knopp explains: “Gay identity in the United States is skewed in terms of class, race, and gender, i.e., that while homosexual desire and behaviors are multiclass and multiracial phenomena involving both women and men, the self-identification of individuals as gay is more of a white, male, and middle-class phenomenon. This is because it is easier, economically and otherwise, for middle-class white males to identify and live as openly gay people than it is for women, non-whites, and non-middle-class people.”

Needless to say, my initial reaction to this explanation was one of astonishment at its lack in exploring in complex ways the relationship between wealth, gender, and race. Although Knopp hints at this complicated relationship in his own research, especially when he shows how the accumulation of wealth through the acquisition of real estate is socially constructed and manipulated, it appears that he is not willing to think in complicated ways about the intersection of race and homosexuality.

On further reflection about Knopp’s explanation, it dawned on me that it is possible that he conceives of race in traditional terms that focus solely on difference. For instance, one case where race becomes important in his studies is when he points out that the gays in the Faubourg often interacted violently with African Americans in adjacent communities. In order to address this issue and to offer a critique of Knopp’s work that takes race into account in discussing gay neighborhood formation in the Faubourg Marigny, I have used my own knowledge about New Orleans, supplemented by further research. What follows is thus a racially conscious engagement with
Knopp's research that points out some of the ways in which race matters as a factor in creating a white and male gay ghetto.

Knopp attributes the gentrification of the Faubourg Marigny to three events: “The movement of a small number of predominantly gay middle-class professionals to Marigny during the 1960s”; “a movement for historic preservation in the neighborhood, organized primarily by gay men”; and “the arrival of speculators and developers, who again were mostly gay, in the mid-to-late 1970s” (46). Although Knopp does not state as much, whiteness (and concomitantly the exclusion of black men and to a significant extent lesbians) mattered in all three events.

First, the gay middle-class professionals who moved to the Faubourg Marigny in the 1960s were men hired to work at the newly created University of New Orleans (UNO). Knopp does not identify them racially, but at that time whiteness was an implicit criterion for employment at UNO, which was founded, during the last days of legalized segregation in 1958, as Louisiana State University at New Orleans. Until the late 1980s, most black professionals in higher education worked at one of the three historically black universities in the city—Dillard University, Xavier University, and Southern University of New Orleans—rather than at UNO. This fact of employment segregation is important for Knopp to consider because informal networks were to play a crucial role in the gentrification of the Marigny. Racially segregated workplaces made it highly unlikely that middle-class black and white gay males would create racially integrated informal networks.

Second, by emphasizing historical preservation, white gays practiced racial and class “tribalism” whereby they identified their interests with those of other middle- and
upper-class whites. Historical preservation has a long history in New Orleans that is very much associated with local white elites. The Vieux Carre Commission, which regulated development in the French Quarter, was established by local white elites in 1936. The initiator of the gay housing movement in the Faubourg Marigny was a white gay architect who lived part of the year in San Francisco's gay Castro. According to Knopp, this architect purchased property in the Faubourg in 1971 and used his connections with other white middle- and upper-class gay men to encourage gay gentrification there. These men created the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association (FMIA) and they emphasized historic preservation. The FMIA cultivated their connections with city officials, successfully lobbied the mayor and city council for land use regulations, and held candidate forums at election time. The success of the FMIA had notable consequences beneficial to middle- and upper-class whites. Local politicians and new zoning regulations made historical preservation a priority in the Faubourg, which had the very practical effect that bank financing and insurance became easier for single men to get.

These middle-class white gay men extended their successes to working-class white gay men when the speculators and developers who brought about the gay gentrification of the Faubourg focused on creating a market for all kinds of housing in the neighborhood among gays. Knopp observes that one real estate broker in particular encouraged "as much in-migration, homeownership, and renovation in Marigny as was humanly possible, regardless of the in-migrant's class status" (53). His targets included gay men employed in the low-wage service sector who otherwise would not have had access to the housing market. One of Knopp's interviewees recalled that
this group included “all the waiters and all the gay people and all the people that were his friends in the Quarter that always wanted houses. . . . Just nobody was ever going to look for that type of person. It was a natural! . . . He was the first person to go after that market” (53). Neither the interviewee nor Knopp, however, address the racial composition of the gay men in the low-wage service sector. My own experience and engagement with gay businesses during this time period informs me that most of these men were, in fact, white.

Exploiting personal and friendship networks that had been established because of shared sexual—and racial and gender—identities was crucial at this stage of gentrification in the Marigny because real estate firms and other speculators resorted to using illegal maneuvers. These schemes allowed members of the local gay community to secure financing for virtually the entire purchase price of the home and enabled first-time home buyers and others of relatively modest means to avoid down payments and invest instead in renovations. Most of these first-time buyers were young gay men who had been recruited into the housing market by other gay men involved in the real estate business. Knopp points out that one real estate firm employed at its peak fifty-two agents, “nearly all of whom were gay” (84). Once again, Knopp is silent about the racial composition of this group.

The consequence of these schemes was that gay men, regardless of social class, received access to housing and the wealth that accrues from home ownership. One interviewee told Knopp: “I was a schoolteacher and I was making $400 a month . . . I saved $1200. The biggest savings of my life! . . . I bought [my first] house for $7500” (83). Knopp estimates that these schemes enabled “hundreds of
gay first-time home buyers to enter the housing market” in what was essentially “a conscious and deliberate project of developing social and economic resources with New Orleans’ and Marigny’s gay community” (87). Black gay men and women were excluded from participating in home ownership in the Faubourg Marigny because they were neither a part of the informal networks of middle-class gay men nor were they employed in the low-wage service sector of gay-owned businesses.

One reason for the exclusion of black gay men that I would like to explore further is the historical meaning of the hostility of whites toward African Americans. Since emancipation, white racial hostility toward blacks has had a material dimension. At the end of the nineteenth century the black journalist and activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett pointed out how lynching benefited whites when she carefully demolished the image of the black male rapist of white women. According to Wells, lynching was nothing more than an “excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down.’” More recent pioneering scholarship in “white studies” confirms Wells’s view. For instance, Thomas A. Guglielmo has shown that in the 1940s and 1950s Chicago’s Italians became increasingly anti-black as they learned to emphasize their identities as “whites” and that “whiteness was not some meaningless social category, but something that carried considerable power and provided them with innumerable resources.” In their particular case, the resources included low-interest loans, backed by the Federal Housing Authority, to purchase homes in neighborhoods whose alleged value rested on excluding blacks.

Admittedly, white hostility takes a particular form when
directed at black gay men. In the next section I address a hostile representation that I observe in the American media. The sheer repetition of this image points to the racialization of gay identity and requires us to ask questions about the role that this form of media hostility plays in the distribution of material resources among gays.

**CONTROLLING IMAGES OF BLACK GAY MEN**

In *Lianna* (1983), John Sayles’s landmark film about the coming out of a suburban, white middle-class housewife, a college football coach makes the following comment: “I had a player once, a halfback, a hell of a runner. Anyhow, I found out in the middle of the season that he, uh you know, he liked guys. I’d recruited this kid out of high school, watched him develop four years and I had no idea. I mean, he was a Black kid. I didn’t even know they had them that way?”1 The coach’s humorous remark underscores twin aspects of the racism and homophobia that keep black gay men invisible or marginal on American film screens. On the one hand his comment refers to the racist idea that African American males are hyper-virile and cannot be gay. On the other hand, the coach’s remarks underscore America’s homophobic preoccupation with white masculinity, particularly the conditions that purportedly produce homosexuality. From these two interrelated perspectives black gay men simply cannot exist, or, if they do, their existence is an anomaly that must be explained.

Here I borrow Patricia Hill Collins’s term “controlling images” to illuminate the continuing explanations for the existence of black gay men in white discourses. Collins points out that in white discourses about black women,
controlling images help “to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{14} The impostor—which also includes the sexually voracious black stud who is not really a gay man since he exists only to satiate white male desire—is the predominate controlling image of black gay men. The impostor is similar to the caricatures of black gay men that E. Patrick Johnson discusses in his dazzling work \textit{Appropriating Blackness}. Using examples such as the “Men On . . .” skit in the 1980s television show \textit{In Living Color}; the Black Power writings by Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka; and the performances by the comic Eddie Murphy, Johnson shows how such caricatures “work to signify black masculinity and heterosexuality as authentic and black homosexuality as trivial, ineffectual, and, indeed, inauthentic.”\textsuperscript{15} In addition, Johnson illuminates how black-created caricatures of black gay men “exemplify the complex process through which black male heterosexuality conceals its reliance on the black effeminate homosexual for its status.”\textsuperscript{16} While homosexuality becomes an inauthentic expression of gender in black discourses, my focus on controlling images pays attention to sites where an always economic racial formation occurs. Like the controlling images of black women as mammy, jezebel, and welfare queen, the ubiquitous image of the black gay male as an impostor or a fraud naturalizes and normalizes the exclusion of black gay men from sites of territorial economies where wealth is created.

As a controlling image, the impostor in white discourses ironically stands as a representation for gay presence while simultaneously deflecting attention away from practices that exclude and marginalize black men. Philip Brian Harper has called attention to this irony in film, noting that since the Black Power era of the late 1960s, representations of black
gay characters have functioned “to buttress (often specifically by challenging) normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identity.”

Film and drama since the 1960s that have included black gay men frequently include a narrative in which characters in the film or we in the audience discover that the character of the black gay man is an impostor or a fraud. In effect, the black gay male’s appearance is a masquerade. This narrative necessitates a pivotal scene (or scenes) of exposure in which the black gay male character is revealed to be a fraud. In Shirley Clarke’s classic documentary Portrait of Jason (1967) the title character presents himself in several guises. In one, Jason describes his work on getting a cabaret act together; in another, he discusses his work cleaning houses. Jason even describes his childhood and his tortured relationship with his father. Eventually Clarke and her assistant, either by providing Jason with alcohol and marijuana or by incessant taunting, expose Jason as just another two-bit hustler and hanger-on.

Mart Crowley’s The Boys in the Band (1970), the first Hollywood film whose sole focus was queer male culture, uses the black character Bernard (Reuben Greene), as well as a variety of other white gay ethnic and social types, to represent the multiculturalism characteristic of the gay world. The play and filmed version of it is set at a birthday party given by Michael for a friend. Philip Brian Harper astutely points out that although Crowley attempts “to convey the sense of idyllic egalitarianism that putatively characterizes gay relations, in supposed contradistinction to ‘mainstream’ society,” we are never allowed for a moment “to forget exactly from where [Bernard] came from to arrive” as a guest at Michael’s party. Bernard is pegged by
one of the characters as a “pickaninny” from the Detroit ghettos who helps to organize the musical relief.\(^20\) Bernard’s scene of exposure occurs during the climactic telephone game when each player must call the one person he loves and confess that love. Bernard comes off as the absolute embodiment of Eldridge Cleaver’s twisted logic that black homosexual men have a “racial death wish” that expresses itself in outrage and frustration due to their inability “to have a baby by a white man.”\(^21\) Bernard reveals that the only man he has ever loved and for whom he still pines is the white man for whom his mother works as a domestic servant.

In the mid-1970s Antonio Fargas played two delightfully queeny characters. As Bernstein in Paul Mazursky’s, *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), he claims to be half-Jewish and becomes a friend to a group of bohemians with artistic aspirations in 1950s New York.\(^22\) As Lindy in Michael Schultz *Car Wash* (1976), Fargas got to deliver the famous quip “I’m more man than you’ll ever be, and more woman than you’ll ever get.”\(^23\) However, both characters were frauds. Bernstein was revealed to be just a guy from the projects and his Jewish ancestry a pathetic fabrication. Despite his famous quip, Lindy is ultimately the disposable “sissy” and, as revealed in the final encounter between the film’s two authentic black men—the black nationalist and the exconvict—not a real man whose life matters. As Vito Russo in *The Celluloid Closet* aptly stated, “Lindy is only a cartoon” whose “effect in the end was just that of the safe sissy who ruled the day in the topsy-turvy situations of Thirties comedies.”\(^24\)

The controlling image of the black gay man as an impostor continues to animate representations of black gay men in film. The impostor shows up in some of the most
critically lauded films and dramatic works. Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* derives its dramatic impact from exposing the black female character's penis. Arguably, Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning!* operates in a manner similar to *The Crying Game* by exposing black and Latino women as men. In the filmed production of John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* Paul (Will Smith) is a sociopathic black gay man who gains entry into the house of upper-middle-class whites by pretending to be the son of Sidney Poitier. Eventually, he is found out and exposed as just another black gay hustler. His fraudulence is even malevolent, however, since he is held responsible both for the homosexual seduction and the suicide of a naïve, young white male from the American heartland. Even representations of black gay men that appear to be progressive rely to a considerable extent on fraudulence. With this in mind, I wish to discuss here in greater detail three incarnations in an independent film, Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy*, and in the television shows *Spin City* and *Six Feet Under*.

Although Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* pioneered the portrayal of bisexuality, the black gay male character Hooper X (Dwight Ewell) is a throwback to Bernstein in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, and Bemard in *The Boys in the Band*, as is evident from the scenes of exposure. One scene takes place at a comic book conference in a special session devoted to minorities. Hooper discusses his comic book creation "White Hating Coon," whose heroic main character is named Maliqua. Hooper gives a speech peppered with inflammatory Afrocentric discourse with allusions to black militant icons such as Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown, and Louis Farrakhan. After an audience member challenges Hooper contending that all blacks really want to be white, Hooper takes out a gun and fires it into
the audience shouting, “black rage.” Later in the scene we learn that the entire interaction, including the gunfire, is a hoax and that Hooper is gay. What is noteworthy about this scene is that Hooper’s gayness posits him, much as The Boys in the Band’s Bernard, as the antithesis of militant black masculinity. Hooper’s queerness offers the viewer the potential to derive a laugh from the speculation that the angry, frightening militant black man is, in actuality, a queer.

Hooper’s fraudulence is, like Paul’s in Six Degrees of Separation, also malevolent. When Hooper realizes that a young African American boy recognizes him as the author of the nationalist “White Hating Coon,” Hooper stops his queeny behavior and turns on a black macho pose. This scene shows that Hooper’s nationalism has no ethical basis; it is merely a front and a means for a profit. Hooper truly lives up to what his name implies, as he is all sound and fury, ultimately, signifying nothing. As a black gay impostor, Hooper is the apotheosis of his own comic creation, “White Hating Coon,” ultimately showing the hilarity of black gay presence.

Spin City, which ran on ABC from 1996 to 2002, is a “workplace” situation comedy involving the staff of the mayor of New York City. Carter Sebastian Heywood (Michael Boatman) is a black gay activist in charge of minority affairs. Although the depiction of Carter as an openly gay black man is a progressive move, much of the humor about Carter recalls the impostor by revealing him to be a fraud. In numerous episodes Carter’s fraudulence is exposed through playing on his position as a gay activist. In one of these episodes Carter leads a hunger strike against a corporation that plans to tear down buildings occupied by working-class people. However, a news crew
captures Carter on camera eating doughnuts because he claims to have hypoglycemia. The show most often displays Carter’s fraudulence in the long-running gag that implies that he and the sexist, racist, and homophobic Stuart Bondelk (Alan Ruck) are ideal companions for each other. The running gag about their rightness for each other includes elements such as showing them finishing each other’s sentences, spending holidays together, and arguing with each other like an old married couple. By the end of the series, the two have even moved in together, although they have not had sex. Carter and Stuart are unaware of how perfect they are for each other even though they are fiercely jealous of each other’s sexual partners.

The idea that Carter and Stuart are a perfect couple is based on what television critic Daniel Mendelsohn calls “the ancient comedic formula ... in which an attractive boy-girl pair are clearly ‘right’ for one another but kept from hooking up.” In Spin City the resulting tension produces some of the most hilarious moments in the show, but at Carter’s expense. Since Carter is putatively the principled black gay activist and his coworkers acknowledge Stuart as sleazy, one wonders what the writers of the show believe Carter and Stuart share that make them “right” for each other. The most obvious possibility is that both are defined by socially agreed-on disreputable sexual identities. But, in this case, the writers reveal their homophobia by equating sleaze with homosexuality. The casting of a black man as the queer political activist was clever, but the show nevertheless relied on a controlling image of black gay men as fraudulent.

HBO’s Six Feet Under is the latest entry to perpetuate the image of black gay men as impostors. The postmodern ironic sensibility of Six Feet Under seems to challenge
prevailing conventions, but the show’s African American gay male character has been transformed from the soul of the show into its lost soul. In the show’s first season the African American Keith Charles (Matthew St. Patrick) appeared to be the show’s moral center—the equivalent of a gay role model. Keith was completely comfortable with being “out.” Further, Keith’s ethical standards led him to break off a relationship with his closeted love interest, the show’s costar David Fisher (Michael C. Hall) who was, for all intents and purposes, the white equivalent of a black buck: a brutal, irresponsible, sexual adventurer.

As the show developed over four seasons, Keith seemed to become “blacker.” This transformation is significant for Keith’s character for two reasons. First, Keith’s blackness seems to mean an incompatibility with gayness to the show’s writers and creators. This point was made quite clear in the third-season episode “Timing and Space,” in which Keith became the source of humor at a gay party because he was completely ignorant about camp sensibility. Since Keith was the only black gay man present, the show seemed to support the belief that blacks are alien to gay sensibilities, such as camp. Moreover, Keith’s complete ignorance about gay forms of culture seemed incongruous with the persona that had been established in the first season when the show implied that Keith belonged to a sizable network of gay men because he was active in queer social, religious, and political organizations.29

Second, the show presents blackness as savage and unredeemable. In a series that is about family dysfunction, the writers reveal a distressing double standard. White families have eccentricities, but black families are violent and criminal. In fact, in the opening episode of the third season, “Perfect Circles,” Keith explains that his violent,
threatening behavior is just his way of showing that he is comfortable with his lover! As Keith is more associated with blackness, he retreats further and further from the first season’s out and proud character. In season four, Keith, who has been fired from his job as a policeman and who works for a private security firm, now pretends to be straight to his coworkers. Keith’s character may morph (as is the nature of an ongoing television series), but at the time of this writing his character continues the controlling image of black gay men as fraudulent.30

This controlling image of black gay men, which is produced by straights and gays, provides ideological support for the exclusion of black gay men from full participation in queer cultures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this exclusion is widespread. Bars have been especially notorious for excluding black men through the practice of “carding,” in which doormen and bouncers request an unreasonable amount of identification as a requirement for admission. Marlon Riggs includes in his brilliant 1989 documentary Tongues Untied a sequence in which an African American gay man becomes outraged after a white doorman requests five forms of picture identification to enter a bar. Interestingly, this belief that the admission of too many black men will cause a bar to lose its desirability for white patrons mirrors the social reality of housing. Sherry Cashin, in The Failures of Integration, repeatedly observes that in housing “whites place a premium on homogeneity,”31 and, further, that “where blacks or Latinos exist in large numbers, whites flee.”32 This practice of white separatism led Marlon Riggs to conclude that while living in San Francisco’s overwhelmingly white and gay male Castro District, he became “an invisible man,” possessing “no shadow, no substance. No history, no place. No reflection.”33 Riggs surmised that for all intents and
purposes, in the gay Castro he had become “an alien, unseen, and seen, unwanted.”

Brian Freeman, a member of the performance art group Pomo Afro Homo, echoes Riggs’s remarks in the 1997 documentary *The Castro*. Freeman recalls being surprised and shocked repeatedly by the overwhelming presence of white men when he moved into the district. Not only were all of the men white, but their prominent attire, which became known as “the clone look,” aped the white working-class male. Since working-class white males historically had been the foot soldiers in struggles against African Americans joining labor unions, black gay men may have been reluctant to embrace the clone look and participate in romanticizing it. Is it any wonder, then, that the two black members of the Village People, a popular 1970s disco group whose members dressed in clone attire, donned military costumes? Apart from the clothing style and its racialized class allusions, Freeman remembers being shocked by the racial insensitivity he found in the district’s bars. One club, he remembers, held a celebration of southern plantation life replete with confederate memorabilia and images of black servants!

The persistence of controlling images of black gay male fraudulence in white discourse reveals white hostility toward black gay men. Racial hostility is important to consider in light of the pivotal role it has played in housing. As I show in the next section, white racial hostility has material benefits.

**RACE, RACISM, CLASS, AND HOUSING**

Historically, housing has been a major site for racial formation in the United States. Melvin Oliver and Thomas
Shapiro, in their impressive volume *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, identify with precision the race-based policies of the state that “collectively enabled over thirty-five million families between 1933 and 1978 to participate in homeowner equity accumulation” but also “had the adverse effect of constraining black Americans’ residential opportunities to central-city ghettos of major U.S. metropolitan communities.”35 The story begins during the Great Depression with the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which refinanced tens of thousands of mortgages in danger of default or foreclosure. Of more importance, the HOLC introduced standardized appraisals of the fitness of properties for financing, and government agents used racial criterion that negatively impacted black people. Oliver and Shapiro state that
government agents methodically included in their procedures the evaluation of the racial composition or potential racial composition of the community. Communities that were changing racially or were already black were deemed undesirable and placed in the lowest category. The categories, assigned various colors on a map ranging from green for the most desirable, which included new, all-white housing that was always in demand, to red, which included already racially mixed or all-black, old, and undesirable areas, subsequently were used by Federal Housing Authority (FHA) loan officers who made loans on the basis of these designations. (17)

The FHA was inaugurated in 1934 to bolster the economy and increase employment by aiding the construction industry. The FHA ushered in the modern mortgage system, which enabled people to buy homes on small down
payments and at reasonable interest rates with lengthy repayment periods. The FHA’s success was immediate and remarkable as housing starts doubled in the seven years after it was inaugurated. However, the FHA’s policies worked against black people. Some policies indirectly impacted black people by favoring the financing of houses in suburbs over those in central cities. Other policies, however, were more direct. Notably, in its Underwriting Manual, the FHA upheld racial segregation and the use of restrictive covenants because it feared that property values would decline if “a rigid black and white segregation was not maintained” (18).

Contemporary institutional racism in the forms of mortgage lending practices and of redlining solidified segregated housing patterns. Oliver and Shapiro call attention to a 1991 Federal Reserve study of 6.4 million home mortgage applications by race and income that disclosed that “commercial banks rejected black applicants twice as often as whites nationwide,” and that “the poorest white applicant . . . was more likely to get a mortgage loan approved than a black in the highest income bracket” (19–20). Discriminatory policies based on exclusion have provided “cumulative advantages” in wealth for white Americans and “cumulative disadvantages” for blacks (51). Based on their study of the 1987–1989 Survey of Income Participation administered by the United States Census Bureau, this means quantifiably that, on average, black households have almost no net financial assets (an accurate measure of wealth since it is the value of all assets less debts, including equity in home and vehicles). Among whites, Oliver and Shapiro note, the situation differs considerably: “Modest net financial assets are held in households from upper-white collar, lower-white collar, and upper-blue-collar origins amounting to $9,000, $9,500, and
$8,744 respectively” (62). Although whites from lower-blue-collar backgrounds trail far behind fellow whites, their median net financial assets of $3,890 are almost four thousand times greater than blacks in upper-white-collar positions! Oliver and Shapiro estimate that in housing alone “institutional biases deprive the current generation of blacks of about $82 billion worth of assets” (169).

The cumulative effect of racial exclusion has been to confine blacks to the bottom of our social hierarchy. The legal scholar Derrick Bell, in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, affirms this view when he states, “Americans achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom—an aspect of social functioning that more than any other has retained its viability and its value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day.” When white gay men practice this exclusion in housing, they are participating in that “unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom.”

**CONCLUSION**

Oliver and Shapiro consider suburbanization possibly “the greatest mass-based opportunity for home ownership and wealth accumulation in American history” (147). Gay neighborhood formation, Escoffier’s “Territorial Economy” of the 1970s, is the “queered” spawn of 1950s suburbanization. Certainly, the example of gay gentrification of the Faubourg Marigny resulted in the equivalent of a queer male Levittown, the Long Island suburb that was built on a mass scale and was eminently affordable thanks to accessible financing, yet as late as 1960 had not a single
black resident among its total population of 82,000 (147). Admittedly, differences exist between a suburb like Levittown and an urban neighborhood like the Faubourg Marigny, yet both are outposts of whiteness—one in the city, the other in the suburb—and both came into existence through policies that made the inclusion of whites and the exclusion of people of color appear normal and even natural. It is my view that the widely circulated image of the black gay imposter plays a role in allowing gay and non-gay whites to bond and to exclude black gay men.

In her famous essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag prophesized that “homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense.” Successful television shows in the new millennium like Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Will and Grace, and Queer as Folk, with their overbearing images of gayness as whiteness and as correct taste, certainly proves Sontag correct. But her prophecy was already evident in the 1970s with the formation of gay neighborhoods such as the Faubourg Marigny. Historical preservation was a strategy based on aesthetic taste that allowed mostly white gay men to accumulate wealth, one of the means for integrating into mainstream culture. The degree to which racialization through processes of inclusion and exclusion is significant for the formation of gay neighborhoods is seldom discussed. However, the fairly widespread controlling image of black gay men as impostors suggests that our exclusion from gay neighborhoods may be crucial for the formation of white inner-city outposts. In a sense, the malevolent black gay imposter legitimates the sense of fear that leads whites to prefer to live in racially homogenous neighborhoods. Ultimately, this fear undermines the social justice rhetoric of the queer movement.


5. Ibid, 67.


10. Lawrence M. Knopp Jr., “Gentrification and Gay
Neighborhood Formation in New Orleans: A Case Study” in Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47. (Subsequent cites appear as page numbers in the text.)


16. Ibid., 74.


19. Ibid., 145.


32. Ibid., 91.


38. Pay attention to the construction of “aesthetes” in these shows. Men are always the purveyors of elegance and taste, which is ironic, if not downright hateful, in the case of *Will and Grace*. Grace, the female protagonist, is an interior designer but lives in the apartment of Will, the white gay male protagonist. Presumably, Will provided the tasteful decorations for this apartment since Grace was unable to decorate her own apartment when she moved away from Will during one season of the show.